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1986

# STATEMENT ON EAST TIMOR TO THE FOURTH COMMITTEE OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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August 15, 1986

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates:

It is with mixed emotions that, for the third time since 1979, I come before this Committee to address the question of East Timor. On the one hand, I had to overcome a sense of futility in order to write this statement. Today, almost nine years after the Indonesian invasion, the obstacles to an authentic process of self-determination on East Timor may seem overwhelming. Nevertheless, I believe as firmly now as I did nine years ago that self-determination is the only just solution to the East Timor question, a solution consistent with international law and in the real interests of all the parties involved, Indonesia, Portugal, and the East Timorese people.

Indeed, what makes the case of East Timor so deeply distressing is that if ever there were a place where the principle of self-determination could have been peaceably implemented, it was that former Portuguese colony. On East Timor there was no recent history of armed resistance to Portuguese rule, no relentless enmity between colonized and

colonizers that would have precluded their rational cooperation in a decolonization process. Nor did that process, however it might have culminated, pose an objective threat to East Timor's powerful neighbor, the Republic of Indonesia. As Professor Benedict Anderson argued before this Committee in 1980, Indonesia had no longstanding interest in annexing the little Portuguese colony, and the interventionist policy adopted in 1975 has had negative economic, military, and diplomatic consequences for Indonesia.

But if the annexation of East Timor is not in Indonesia's national interest, it is the East Timorese people who have suffered the most from Jakarta's policy. I will not confront you once again with the grim chronicle of East Timorese experiences under Indonesian rule. I have no doubt that other speakers will discharge that sad role. As an anthropologist who spent two years on East Timor, from October 1972 through November 1974, my task is to speak once again to the question of the abilities of the East Timorese to determine their political future.

Let us bracket, for the moment, the specific means at hand, the indigenous political traditions and local institutions of collective decision-making, which might so easily have been enlisted in a process of self-determination. Let us begin instead with the concept of an "East Timorese people"

who would be the subjects in that process. Whereas many speakers today will claim to represent "the people of East Timor," my concern is to reflect on the referential meaning of that phrase. For "the people" is never a purely objective category. It is conventionally understood to mean that those so designated not only share elements of a common culture (as do the various ethnic groups of East Timor with, for example, those on the western half of the island), but also that they recognize one another as belonging to the same nation or potential nation, and therefore as both empowered and obligated to participate collectively in the formation of a ruling state.

In other words, a heightened awareness of mutual rights and duties and a collective readiness to instantiate that awareness in action are at least in part what converts the members of an ethnic group or territory into the legitimate subjects of political decision-making. Where such awareness exists, the forcible occupation of territory by foreigners, which the international community condemns in principle, will be perceived by the indigenous occupants as a violation of their rights. On East Timor, I will argue, a coherent sense of national identity, conditioned by cultural responses to colonialism and decolonization, was in process of emergence by 1974.

The precolonial political situation on East Timor was one of small, self-governing, agrarian communities. Unlike the western part of the island, where structurally similar communities acknowledged the authority of two state-like entities, political integration in the east did not go beyond the community level. Family resemblances among the cultural traditions of these communities both reflected and facilitated communication across ethnic boundaries. But while the precolonial communities may have had an awareness of their broadly shared culture, the foundations for a sense of political unity were laid over the course of the colonial period.

Under colonial rule, the indigenous peoples came to view their similarities to one another in contrast to their differences from the European rulers. Although the various ethnic groups of East Timor preserved traditions of their particular origins, some defining themselves as "people of the land" and others claiming descent from "people of the sea," all these groups identified themselves as land people in opposition to the Portuguese, and they came to collectively refer to themselves in this context as "Timorese". Thus the land/sea distinction, which had traditionally been used to differentiate ethnic groups from one another or, in some cases, community members from their indigenous chiefs, came to express the global relationship of the colonized to the colonizers.

For most of the colonial period, however, this heightened sense of cultural unity did not receive political expression. Although individual groups offered intermittent resistance to the Portuguese throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the specific problem of nationalism did not arise, nor did the early twentieth century "pacification" campaigns and the subsequent consolidation of Portuguese rule in themselves create an oppositional nationalist identity among the subjugated peoples. In part, nationalist sentiment was incompatible with the traditional ideology of the state, according to which legitimate rulers come from outside of the communities that they rule. In a cultural milieu where even indigenous chiefs are regarded as outsiders or "stranger-kings," the classification of the Portuguese as overseas foreigners facilitated the legitimation of colonial rule. As late as 1974, most Timorese continued to conceive of the Portuguese as their legitimate sovereigns. That conception, however, did not preclude feelings of resentment, but rather tended to promote them. The deepest bitterness is commonly felt toward those from whom we expected better than we receive, and Timorese, with their high, culturally patterned expectations of the colonial government, found themselves repeatedly disappointed.

The group that I lived with and studied on Timor are known as the Mambai, and they had developed the legitimizing tendency to an extreme degree. Mambai represent themselves

as primordial "land people," direct descendants of the original human ancestors. The Portuguese occupy an intriguing position in this mythical genealogy. Although the Portuguese are categorically "people of the sea," Mambai trace their ultimate origins to Timor and to a junior line whose ancestor fled overseas to Portugal, at the beginning of human history. According to this foundation myth, which was repeatedly invoked in response to the prospect of decolonization, the Portuguese had later been summoned by their Timorese "elder brothers" to return to Timor and reassume the order-enforcing function of the state. The Mambai, as the eldest branch of humanity, retained ritual authority over the cosmos and promoted fertility for all humankind.

What is most striking about this mythology of rule is that it fuses the non-nationalist idea of the stranger-king with a proto-nationalist idea of primordial kinship between rulers and ruled. Thus the Portuguese, as Mambai conceived of them, were both outsiders and insiders, and, most important, their establishment of political control was understood as the fulfillment of an obligation to the elder people of the land. These mythically embodied concepts of rule, order, and legitimacy mediated Mambai responses to the question of decolonization.

It must be said that their initial responses were hardly those of model nationalists. In the immediate wake of the April Revolution, when the possibility of independence was first openly articulated, many Mambai used their mythology to reject that possibility outright. Portuguese rule, it was argued,

was part of a necessary order of things, and the idea that their "younger brothers" might depart provoked widespread anxiety among Mambai. Their anxiety, however, soon gave rise to concerned, thoughtful, and remarkably sophisticated reflection on the political future. Indeed, Mambai had long been dissatisfied with the prevailing political conditions. Their highly developed model of the ideal polity had made them sensitive to colonial abuses of power, which they construed and condemned as violations of the obligations between kinsmen. They did not need the nationalist intelligentsia's concept of "imperialism" in order to recognize exploitation and injustice, and they had long been accustomed to think in terms of reforming, if not of transforming, the relationship of the state to its subjects.

Few of the Mambai whom I knew had decisively committed themselves to any of the three, newly formed political parties, Fretilin, UDT, or Apodeti. What they had accepted was that their "younger brothers" would indeed depart, and that the determination of the political future concerned all the "people of the four quarters," as Mambai, who locate themselves at the symbolic center of the land, refer to the rest of the indigenous population. In the last months before my own departure, my illiterate yet wise companions called with increasing urgency for a great reunion, at which representatives from all the ethnic groups of the province, from the new political parties, and from the colonial administration would collectively decide on a proper course of action. Although the phrase was still foreign to them, what Mambai advocated

in their own cultural idioms was an authentic process of self-determination. Mambai had not yet endorsed the nationalist program articulated by Fretilin. They had, however, implicitly embraced a fundamental nationalist principle, which is that the members of a category of persons have mutual political obligations toward one another by virtue of their membership in that category. In the process of confronting a new, largely unanticipated situation, Mambai had constituted themselves and their neighbors as "the people of East Timor."

This incipient nationalist sentiment defines the local moral-political context for evaluating the legitimacy of the Indonesian annexation. Indonesians, it should be noted, were classified as "overseas foreigners," and Mambai never included them among the prospective participants in the desired reunion. If pressed, Mambai would concede that, by the logic of their own mythology of common origins, the Indonesians must also be their distant kin, but these were kin, Mambai would add, whose names and genealogies were unknown, objective relatives, in effect, with whom Mambai felt no subjective sense of solidarity.

Ours, of course, is an age of manipulated mythologies, and it is not improbable that the Indonesian occupiers of East Timor (who may well be familiar with traditions of outsider-rulers) will attempt consciously to exploit local beliefs in their own political interest. If so, I do not think that they will succeed. The legitimation of Portuguese rule was effected slowly, over the course of a long, relatively benign colonial intervention which did not entail large-scale military operations

until the early twentieth century, whereas Indonesia's entry into East Timorese political life has been both abrupt and violent. Moreover, whereas the Portuguese colonizers confronted small, self-contained political communities, the Indonesians came into a radically different moral-political environment, characterized by the emergence of a new sense of national identity. The ideological solution to foreign intervention constructed during the colonial period derived its plausibility from a hegemonic, non-nationalist theory of the stranger-state. Given the shifts that had occurred in popular consciousness by December 1975 and the ongoing activity of the Fretilin resistance to Indonesian rule, such solutions are increasingly unlikely to appeal to the East Timorese people.

That Mambai and other Timorese may resign themselves to the Indonesian presence is another matter. I have no way of estimating the current strength of Fretilin's popular support, but in my view, it is not by the degree of ongoing, active resistance that you of the international community should judge this case. In December of 1975, a nationalist principle was violated and, according to my understanding of East Timorese consciousness, that violation was felt as such by the indigenous peoples. It should be repeatedly and strongly condemned by the international community. In the meanwhile, as my expectations of a swift resolution to the East Timor question recede, I can only hope that the East Timorese are able to construct

some modus vivendi under foreign occupation, until such time as their right to self-determination is restored.